

Jewish Values Regarding Physical Reopening of Our Institutions

April 2020

As the weeks of mandated physical separation continue there is growing desire around the world to reopen businesses and other institutions as quickly as possible. Failing economies and ballooning job loss create tremendous economic pressure on our families and threaten the viability of our institutions. There is also a great yearning for social interaction with physical proximity and the need to be relieved of the isolation and loneliness of the past weeks.

We hope this document will be used by clergy, staff, boards, and leadership of institutions associated with our movement and clergy in various parts of the world to guide their decisions in coming weeks as we respond to this desire.

It is clear that what will emerge will be a gradual and phased restarting of physical proximity, based on factors including:

- Declining rates of infection and mortality in specific areas
- Availability, accuracy, and ability to obtain swift results of testing both for the active virus and immunity, along with contact tracing to contain infection “hot spots”
- Development and wide availability of treatments that reduce mortality
- Development and wide availability of a vaccine

The timeline for each of these conditions is uncertain, and is also likely to vary among different locations around the globe. We do not have the expertise to provide specific medical guidance. Instead we suggest relying on medical authorities who can assess local conditions. Individuals and institutions should follow government guidelines and evaluate opportunities to increase physical proximity based on sound scientific and medical advice.

Along with those medical considerations, Jewish institutions should also factor into their decisions the values that have continued to guide us throughout this crisis. These include:

- *Pikuah Nefesh* -- “Safeguarding Life” is a bedrock principle of Jewish law, and supersedes most other obligations or mitzvot. To that end, our institutions must ensure that any steps towards restoring physical proximity place preserving life first and foremost.
- *Sakanat Nefeshot* -- “Endangering Life” -- participants, staff, and clergy should not be in positions where they will be unduly endangering their own lives or the lives of their families due to pressure to restore activities. We must honor the needs of those who lead or participate in our communities when they have individual circumstances requiring the need to reduce risk to themselves or those they live with.
- *She’at Hadehak* -- “Extraordinary Moment” -- Jewish life has always made adjustments in times of emergency and crisis. We will need to come to terms with the fact that this crisis will last for well over a year, and that we will need to continue to change our

expectations and operations. We will need continued flexibility in Jewish practice informed by our commitment to authentic modes of interpretation of our tradition.

- *Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh Bazeh* -- “We Are Responsible for One Another” -- It’s our job to look out for the mental and physical health and safety of one another. Those who have resources need to give *tzeddakah* to help others and to sustain our institutions. Our participants are connected to others outside our community, and our policies and activities affect the broader rate of infection. And we must be sure that we act in ways in which clergy, staff, and participants do not feel discriminated against or unduly disadvantaged based on their health needs.
- *Hesed* -- “Profound Love and Kindness” -- Decisions around our operations and the risks involved create uncertainty, grief, and anxiety, and we must act with tremendous love and kindness towards the members of our families, communities, and the world at large.

Institutions should therefore:

- *Act with caution* before undertaking activities that allow for physical proximity. Given all of the values above, and despite the fact that it continues to challenge the finances of our institutions, in many locations our concern for health and safety **should make us among the last to return to physically proximate activity, rather than the first.**
- Ensure *partnership* in decision making among clergy, staff, and lay leadership. Institutions should establish a committee that involves all of these leaders, along with medical professionals *with appropriate expertise*, to evaluate next steps.
- *Continue to use technology whenever possible* for prayer, education, and community building. Even when not ideal, these tools continue to ensure health and safety and help avoid tempting people who should not attend because of age or health conditions from endangering themselves. Other key functions like daycare, nursery school, or camp might be possible to resume on a different timetable.
- Realize that *the path toward resuming “normal operations” will be long.*
- Understand that even when we have the medical technology to overcome the challenge of this virus, *our communities will still be forever changed in the way we operate* and we should be *looking for the ways in which our new modes of operation can permanently enhance our reach and impact.*
- *Work together with others in local communities* to develop a coordinated approach, given that specific conditions relating to the stage and severity of the pandemic are different in each locale.
- *Respect* decisions made by synagogues, institutions, clergy, staff, leaders and participants. These decisions are hard, the data and guidance from authorities is sometimes not clear or ambiguous, and the perception of risk and safety can vary. Anxiety around making the right choice needs to be met with patience, deep listening, and acceptance.

Our tradition teaches us that there are blessings to be found in every moment. Moreover, our experience as a people shows us that we can exist and maintain spiritual solidarity even when

we cannot see one another physically. With positive and inspiring leadership, patience, and tremendous *hesed* we will persevere during this challenging period and make choices which preserve the well-being of our community while honoring the profound need and desire to participate in Jewish life and meet our spiritual and communal needs.